

# THE PROBLEM OF RELATIVISM

**Relativism:** this is the theory that truths and values depend on particular viewpoints. One cannot say that certain things are *good* or *true* or *beautiful* or *excellent*, but only that they are **seen** to be so from a particular 'angle'. "Man is the measure of all things" said Protagoras. Nietzsche based his views on an acceptance of relativism. The opposite is **absolutism** (favoured by Plato).

**Obvious extremes:** in some cases it seems fairly obvious that things are either relative or absolute:

- runners might be *fast*, or clothes the *right size*, or there might be a *best colour* for a wall, relative to certain people.
- $3+2=5$ , or *Pythagoras's Theorem*, or that it takes *time* to move through *space*, seem absolute, independent of who thinks it.

**Main Problems:** a strong commitment to either absolutism *or* relativism seems to produce problems:

- If relativism is true, why should we care about anyone else's opinion about anything?
- If relativism is true, what would motivate us to pursue truth or science or beauty or achievement of any kind?
- If absolutism is true, what makes it true? Isn't the human mind the only place where goodness, beauty and truth can exist?
- If absolutism is true, doesn't this lead to arrogance and intolerance, from people who claim to be *experts* in the truth?

**Framework:** Where relativism is true, it is a relationship between certain ideas and their supposed source:

What might be relative?		Relative to what?	
Maths	Are arithmetic or geometry always true, or do they depend on a human viewpoint? Would the Martians agree with us about such things? Could we change them?	Ultimate reality/Nature	Are certain truths and values built into the fabric of all reality, in any possible universe? Are they 'necessary' rather than 'contingent'? [Plato's theory of Forms supported this view]
Logic	Is logic the same everywhere and at all times? If aliens were rational, would we expect to mostly agree with them? Are there many logics?	This universe	Are these truths and values absolutely unchangeable in this universe (although they <i>could</i> be different in another one)?
Laws of physics	Are the laws of physics unchanging throughout space and time? Could they ever change in this universe, or in a different one? Have we invented these laws (perhaps without realising it)?	The Earth	Could it be that certain things are beautiful and true in our world, but elsewhere in the universe, or to vastly different (non-DNA) organisms, it is all quite different?
Constants of physics	Are these also fixed? Suppose they change continuously, but we can't detect it because we change with them?	Human beings	Are a wide range of values and knowledge correct for <i>all</i> human beings (even, for example, 'primitive' tribesmen), but other animals and aliens could have different but valid views?
Space and time	Are these just aspects of workings of the human mind, or are they facts about reality? If so, could they ever be different? Can we know objective truths about them?	A culture	Are truth and value the product of cultures, such as the scientific view, or Islam, or jungle-dwellers, but there is nothing to decide <i>between</i> cultures, which are all equal?
Morality	Is morality just 'down to the individual', or a set of local rules which could change (like fashion), or is there something 'deeper' which makes it <i>true</i> that certain things are right or wrong?	A language	Might our native language 'create our reality' for us (as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests). We certainly accept truths and values as we learn language. Can we escape language?
Beauty	Is 'beauty in the eye of the beholder?' Does this mean that to suggest that a 'great' artist is <i>better</i> than a 'bad' one is just arrogance, and there are no standards or good taste? Are a person's judgement and their personal preference the same thing?	A nation	Are values and truths created by a nation, which builds them into its legal system and customs?
Excellence	Is it a <i>fact</i> that some achievements are outstanding, in art, sport, science, maths, philosophy, carpentry (etc.), or is it just a matter of current fashion and the prejudices of people in authority?	A community	Are our views actually created by smaller groups, the local communities who actually meet and talk to one another, such as a school, a local church, a town, a local age-group, or the followers of a particular television programme?
Pleasure	Are there some activities which just <i>are</i> pleasurable, and if some people don't like them that is ignorance? If I don't like opera, am I missing something, or is my dislike as valid as their enthusiasm?	A family	Might the source be something even smaller, just a few people, like a family or a group of friends, who strongly mould one another's minds
Perception	To what extent do the senses tell us about objective reality, or do they just reveal our own minds? Consider colour, sound, taste, shape, hardness, heat. Do we create the world or experience it?	An individual	Perhaps each person has their own values and truth, which may resemble other people's, but don't have to. We can form our own private truth and principles, without contradiction.
Religion	Are there objective facts about religion, or is it just a matter of cultural or personal points of view? Do we each have our own private 'God'?	The whim of a moment	Maybe we don't even need to be consistent in our own beliefs. We can shift our beliefs and moral standards whenever we feel like it, if there is no authority for them.
Politics	Are there facts about how humans (or ants) should best organise themselves, or are all political systems equally 'good'?		
Truth	In general, is there any such thing as Truth, apart from points of view, which are hopelessly distorted by cultural and personal prejudices?		

**Slippery Slope Problem:** relativism may be dangerous because we concede some things as being obviously relative (such as beauty), but then find that the same principles apply to other things (such as morality) which we had hoped were absolute. We go down a slippery slope and conclude that *nothing* is fixed, and lose faith in everything we previously believed. But is this unavoidable? Can we find a dividing line between what is relative to a human viewpoint, and what is objectively true?

## Possible Responses to the Problem

1. Accept Plato's Theory of Eternal Ideas (or 'Forms') - that we use reason to work out the way things must necessarily be.
2. Recognise God as the source of truth and value, and treat them as absolute because his nature is fixed and eternal.
3. Accept that certain things seem to be absolute in this universe, even though we can't prove this to be so.
4. Accept that most judgements depend on human observers, but that they are still true *for humans*, a part of fixed human nature.
5. Recognise that our views (even science, for example) *are* a part of human culture (and so could have turned out differently), but are nevertheless valuable, worth respecting and learning, and must be in some way based on what is essential for living.
6. Accept relativism, but recognise that most truth and value comes from other people, and we might as well swim with the current and accept most of them, but it could all be completely different, and it wouldn't matter if it was.
7. Accept individual relativism, and deny anyone else's right to dictate values and truth to us, so that we can see the world and human life in any way we like (e.g. believe in fairies), and create our own private truth, morality and beauty.
8. Cease to care about anything, and live for the moment, following the passing mood, and accepting fashion or whatever appeals.
9. 'Turn the tables' (as Greeks said) and ask whether *relativism* is relative. If it isn't absolutely true, why should we accept it?